

Gender inequalities in India

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Abstract

It is now widely acknowledged that in India, despite many spectacular advances in different sectors, there remains an undeniable gap between women and men regarding their political, economic, and social conditions. Referring to the Indian situation, Dreze and Sen wrote: "Inequality between men and women is one of the most crucial disparities in many societies, and this is particularly so in India.

Keywords: gender, inequalities, societies, economic, social

Introduction

Despite the high status of women during the Vedic period, gender bias was entrenched deeply in the cultural heritage of not only India but in other societies also. Manu, the Hindu law-giver, had stated wherever women are seen, God chooses it as His abode. The scriptures also idolized the place of women in Indian society as Devi/Shakti. According to Atharva Veda, the birth of a girl, grants elsewhere, here grant a boy: This discrimination is found not only in India, but also among other societies. In Japan, the Boys Day is celebrated by declaring a holiday, but there is no such holiday as Girls Day, Similarly, Chinese women preferred to die, rather stop bearing children, if the first baby was a girl. Even in modern Western societies, which are democratic and progressive, there are more chances of divorce, where there are female children.

India is an ancient country of pre-historic culture and its roots can be traced back to ancient Hindu civilization. India is the land of mysticism, spiritualism, myths and legends within a closed society, which has been in existence for the past 5,000 years. From ancient times, Indian society is moulded into historical, political, cultural and religious features. The values and norms affecting women have their roots in the past. The Vedas, Epics, and the Puranas and other classic Sanskrit literature of ancient times are the repositories of these values and norms under which Indian society derived its strength and stamina. The image and individuality of Indian women are embedded and clearly laid down in traditional beliefs and mythology.

According to ancient scriptures, Mahavishnu allotted his heart for the dwelling of Mahalakshmi and so traditionally a woman is considered as the foundation of good qualities in the heart of a man. No wonder, in all Indian language, the words which denote good qualities like Bhakti, Shanti, Shakti, Daya, medha, kshama, Sri, Sruti Dhriti, Buddhi and Shraddha are feminine words. In Bhagavad Gita, it is said that God is present more prominently as seven divine qualities in women-frame, prosperity, speech, memory, intelligence, fortitude and forgiveness. According to Vinobhaji, the motherhood is the highest honour not only for woman but also for a man. woman

gets it by her very nature, but a man has to strive for it. That is the highest epithet Saint Jnaneshwar has given Mauli, that is, the Mother.

Thus, the role of women in every aspect of human life in family and society is clearly enshrined in the ancient texts. The formative structure of traditional Indian society can be seen from Arthashastra and Manusmriti. The sacred institution of Hindu way of life, the doctrine of pativrata, the dual position of woman as wife and mother and the high regard given to Indian motherhood, etc, clearly defines the woman's role in ancient society.

It is evident from all available accounts that Vedic society was a patriarchal one and hence father was the head of the family. But women occupied the same position as men. Reference to complete gender equality is found in all parts of Vedic literature. Women reached high standard of learning and culture, and made all round progress.

According to Rig Veda, women were given equal status with men in every walk of life, that is, in the matter of education, religious rights and freedom of movement. Women were given freedom regarding the choice of their husbands. Marriages were performed with the approval of parents though it was not absolutely essential to obtain their consent. During Rig Veda, the practice of allowing women to select a husband out of a chosen group ruled out the possibility of child marriage. There are also references to marriages, which were of Gandharva form in which one's choice played an important role.

The high esteem in which the wife was held during the Vedic age is evident from the fact that she was considered the half that completed the husband. A man could not perform social or religious duties without his wife. The wife assisted the husband not only in his secular duties but also at the altar. The husband and wife together were supposed to keep the household fire burning so that the daily offering of the agnihotra could be carried on. The Rig Veda relates us a story of grihapari who left his wife because of her impertinence and went away for practising penance but the God explained to him that he could not perform the penance without his wife.

Manusmriti, an authoritative compendium of laws, was written by the lawmaker Manu. It forms the beginning of a set of law books, which have come down to posterity under the special designation of Samhita. It stands midway between the old law books and the new, forming a connecting link between the ancient and the modern legislators. As a code of law, it has for centuries held supreme, over India and the Hindu population.

Manusmriti divides the society into four Varnas, that is, Brahmins the privileged class Kshatriyas, the warrior class, Vysyas, the business class and Sudras, the inferior class, Manu gives women the status of sudras, that is, the lowest status. He thus lays down a theoretical basis for the social and legal subordination of women. This degradation got strengthened ideologically when in the Bhagavad Gita the new path of Bhakti was shown to be the way for liberation to the Vysyas, Sudras and women.

During the medieval period, female infanticide and child marriage became very common. Purdah system became a practice as a result of Muslim rule. The practice was unknown in the previous period of history where women could move out freely. With the arrival of the Muslims, they were compelled to live in seclusion in their homes. Whenever they had to go out they went either in palanquin covered with curtains or used Purdah.

The epics state that Hindu girls in the ancient times had the freedom to select their husbands themselves. The Swayamvara was such practice among the ruling families. But during the medieval period, false pride developed with regard to marital and social practice. Marriage was considered a socio-economic contract. It had deprived the female of freedom to marry males of their choice. Besides, women were considered as a species of sexual pleasure of men. This approach towards women led to early marriages. The parents of the girls in order to avoid social disgrace found resort in early marriages. This became a common feature by the 18th century.

Thus, a definite pattern of inheritance of property emerged during this phase, which to some extent benefited women. Even after the invasion of the Muslims, the Hindu society remained rigid and continued its old pattern of life based on the principles and directives of Manu.

The position of women in society is not exactly what it should be. In the social and cultural fields, they have lost their position. In the economic sphere of activity, though they play a major role, their contribution is not recognized, and as a class they continue to occupy a secondary position. Unfortunately, their helplessness in different walks of life has led to their exploitation at almost every step. Lots of women in the society are subjected to cruelty and exploitation. What is most degrading for women is that they are not only being neglected in the social milieu but are subjected to harsh cruelties and atrocities as a class. These atrocities are of many types ranging from mental torture to psychological assaults, which often result in murder or suicide. Deprived of all education, confined within four walls of the house, seeing little of the world and knowing little of it our women are not better than slaves.

Gender concerns need to be integrated with the overall development policies of public authorities at all levels of governance. Attempts are now being made to reposition the

entire governance system in each country to have a practical reflection of gender concerns in the overall governing system of different nations. Governments in particular and other organizations including major international organizations like the World Bank, UNDP etc. are seeking to advance gender equality and equity through the mainstreaming of gender in development planning, budgeting, project planning and implementation. gender mainstreaming requires that gender be brought into the center of discussions about development, and not marginalized as a woman's issue. Thus gender mainstreaming makes gender central to all aspects of development planning and practices. Broadly, it refers to the application of gender perspectives to all legal and social norms and standards, to all policy development, research, planning, advocacy, development, implementation and monitoring as mandatory for all participatory institutions and agencies. Women's empowerment through gender mainstreaming is expected to bring about overall societal development by addressing gender inequalities in all aspects of development, across all sectors and programmes, especially in the decision making structures at all governmental levels.

There is a gradual realization now dawning on most policy planners that more than anything else awareness raising is of crucial importance in any attempt to empowering women. this sentiment has been well expressed in a recent discussion paper by a former lady Parliamentarian. That the development model has by passed women is a generally accepted idea today; so the question of development is now rejected altogether so that empowerment becomes a mere cultural matter, a question of advocacy and awareness raising. Even while all those fruitless general welfare measures like public distribution system and education and health subsidies are taken away, we think we may succeed in raising self-confidence in women, in instilling into them an awareness of empowerment. We think she can become, through her mere awareness a participant in the process of social change.

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